The Villain

You were the weather of my childhood, Daddy. I could tell by how hard you stamped into the gravel as you walked up the garden path to the back door the kind of mood you were in— loud and fast meant we were in for storms, very gentle and slow, we were in for heavy rain — silence, brooding; moderate and regular (this was rare) meant there'd be a little sun — smiles and anecdotes from the office. You had enough anger in you to machine gun a room full of people to death. I once said to my mother, when I was about nine, that I was afraid you'd kill all of us. "Oh no, he's much more suicidal than he is homicidal," she said. She was right. She knew you well. She knew you before the storms, but she told me when you were courting her, you would snap at her for no apparent reason. She put this down to stress at work. She had no clue that she was marrying an alcoholic. Of course drinking is only a symptom of deeper mental problems; in your case, your inability to deal with your anger. And no wonder you were angry. You couldn't become an engineer as you wished because your parents couldn't afford to send you to engineering school. Instead you got an accounting degree. You were brilliant at math but could never use your brilliance except to show off by getting right immediately the mind-blowing mental arithmetic questions on "The Twenty-Four Thousand Dollar Question" on TV. Stuck in a job you hated all your life was bad enough, but in the Air Force in World War II, six of your friends were shot down and killed. No wonder you drank to kill the pain, numb out the anger, or try to.

In England much of the time, the skies are grey; it drizzles a light insistent rain, a relentless gloominess which describes you. When you entered the room, your gloominess dampened all of us. I thought I hated you as I hated that kind of weather. But it was because I loved you so much that your moods hurt me so much—the sunshine was so short-lived and the rain so interminable. I wanted to help. I told jokes, did imitations, made you laugh; but nothing took the chip off your shoulder. But you are not the villain of this story, Daddy. The villains are alcoholism, the Depression and the War.

It's amazing to me now that you functioned as well as you did. You were never late for work, died owing no money and by sheer force of will really, quit drinking two and a half years before you died. For a highly sensitive, brilliant man living in cruel times, you did remarkably well. I thought when you died the storms would stop; but I had nightmares about you for twenty years afterwards—you chased me with an axe, fired at me with a shot gun. You were the shadow at the window or under the door, the cause of terror from which I have been running for thirty years. Writing this, I can finally look you in the eyes, Daddy, and say, "I forgive you. I love you. Thank you for trying so hard to hold things together to keep the weather temperate **just** enough to give me enough peace and hope to study, do well at school, not go mad with grieving for you." If your spirit is hovering near as I write this, be a guardian angel for me, shed some sunlight on my lonely soul.

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